

Tape: 041

Transcript of Interview with Denise Meridith

Conducted by Jim Muhn

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INTERVIEW WITH DENISE MERIDITH

This is an interview with Denise Meridith, Associate Director, Bureau of Land Management, held on August 23, 1995, in Washington, DC. The interviewer is Jim Muhn, Land Law Historian for the Bureau of Land Management.

Jim: Okay, Ms. Meridith, can you give us a brief resume of your education and the jobs you've held before this one?

Denise: Okay, I was. Actually, I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and my original goal was to be a veterinarian, so I went to Cornell University which is the only vet school in New York state. Once I was there, I switched into wildlife biology in my sophomore year there and graduated in 1973 with a B.S. in wildlife biology, natural resources. My first position was with the Bureau of Land Management in 1973, Las Vegas District. I was originally hired to be a wild horse and burro specialist but when I arrived, they said they hadn't had a wildlife biologist in a couple of years, so I assumed those duties as well. While I was there in Las Vegas, I switched after a couple of years from wildlife biologist to environmental specialist and eventually environmental coordinator. In 1977, I moved to the Eastern State Office of BLM in Silver Spring, Maryland. That's where it was at the time. As an environmental specialist who also handled some of the wildlife biology issues in the Eastern United States. In 1979, I took a job as a GS-13 in the Washington Office, worked for John Crawford who was Division Chief of Wildlife. I was wildlife habitat manager and probably later I'll come back to some of the accomplishments I felt I had at that particular job. In 1980, I was selected as the Deputy State Director for Lands and Renewable Resources in Eastern States Office which had now moved to Virginia. It was in Alexandria, Virginia, at the time. I stayed there until 1986 which I became the Deputy State Director for Lands Renewable Resources in New Mexico, stationed in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In 1989, I became the Associate State Director in California, Sacramento. In 1991, Cy Jamison, Director of the Bureau, asked me to come back and be State Director of Eastern States Office which I'd moved Springfield while I was there, Springfield, Virginia, and I had a short stint for 2 months in the summer of 93. Secretary Bruce Babbitt asked me to be on a team of four or five people who helped initiate National Biological Survey, as it was called at the time, NBS. So, I worked on that detail for

a couple of months. And then Jim Baca, who was then the Director of Bureau of Land Management asked me to be the Deputy Director of BLM in August of 1993.

Jim: Okay. Actually, why don't we go back to when you came to the Bureau in 1973. There were not that many women professionals in the Bureau at that time, particularly in wildlife. And, of course, we could also, I suppose, say that there weren't that many black women professionals in the Bureau of Land Management. In fact, you may very well may have been the first black women wildlife specialist in the Bureau at that time.

Denise: Yeah, I guess, more of an exaggeration. I was the first women professional in BLM that was hired in 1973, much less the first African American woman. I was basically the first woman professional that BLM hired in the field.

Jim: And how did you feel when you came into the Bureau with that status.

Denise: Well, I didn't know that at the time. Whenever they approach you, they don't say, guess what? We've never had one before but you're going to be the first one. So, they really didn't talk about that before I came to the Bureau. I found out after I got to the Bureau. But it was, I had no problems my entire life. I've been first in a lot of different areas. In the 1960's, I was among the first wave of students that were integrated into schools, so it's sort of been a trend in my life so it wasn't any different from anything else.

Jim: Did you find this working as a woman in Nevada with, I assume you had contact with the ranchers and others out there. Did that seem to go well?

Denise: Yeah. Actually, I never had any problems. It was, I think, and this is back in the 70's, so people were sort of shocked when they met you or shocked when you walked into the room or shocked when they sat down at a meeting, but once we

started talking, really I didn't have any problems with anybody in Nevada. The state government, at that time, BLM was dealing with state which sounds a little familiar. Hasn't changed much. And when I first arrived in Las Vegas District, my supervisor said, we don't talk to those guys who happen to be the fish and game people that were housed right next door to us. So, I sort of didn't pay attention to that advice and started talking with them and we got along famously, and I really never had any problems.

Jim: What were the wildlife issues in the Las Vegas District at the time you were there?

Denise: At that time, pupfish. Not too many people in the Bureau probably still remember that issue but the pupfish issue was very big. Devils Hole were the last population on certain sub-species of pupfish. And we had several other sub-species in the Vegas District, so I worked really on that project a lot. Big horn sheep was a big issue. Populations there. And also, another issue that has continued on to this day is desert tortoise. At that time, they were just discovering the disease that the tortoise were getting and the populations were started to be affected. So, I would say those were the three top issues when I was there.

Jim: And you were talking about you came to the Washington Office in 1979 and worked as a wildlife habitat manager? You said you wanted to bring up some things there.

Denise: Yeah, that was just a very interesting time. That was during the Carter administration and minerals was a very hot topic at that time in a positive way as far as leasing. Coal was king, which has really changed now, but coal was king at that time. So, I did a lot of work with negotiating and mediating conflicts between minerals people and wildlife people. So, I worked a lot of mediation. I also, during that period, that I'm pretty happy about, I developed the long-term training course for beginning wildlife professionals that was put on, at that time, it was called the Phoenix Training Center. So, I just felt that was really significant because every new wildlife biologist at that time went through that course. So, it was,

and it was a chance, I think, it also resolved a lot of issues. At that time, wildlife biologists were feeling very left out of the process, alienated. It was very difficult for kids to come in straight from college and had learned to do inventories and very animal-related issues in college and then coming to work for an agency like Bureau of Land Management where you really don't manage the animals. You manage the habitat and making that transition. So, this course, which was a 4-month course, was very helpful in helping them make that transition. We talked to them about BLM culture, how to get along, different types of BLM people, how to work with state government, how to look at habitat management rather than species management. And so we, it went on for a few years, so it was quite a few people went through that course. So, I like to feel that I had an impact on them, wildlife in general in the BLM.

Jim: And then you went on to Eastern States Office which is often been regarded by many within the Bureau as sort of stepchild. How did you feel about the programs there that you were in charge? What were the issues while you were there?

Denise: Again, minerals development was luckily a good time for Eastern States because it has about 40 million acres of subsurface minerals, so it essentially became one of the OPEC states as we used to call it. So, we did a lot of work on coal, oil and gas was a very big program at the time. We did a lot of work on that. As people remember, we were going through oil crises and how we going to deal with not having to import oil and domestic development, so it was a very active time for Eastern States. Phosphate was a big issue at the time. Again, the environmental impacts of development of phosphate in Florida. And it was, to me, one of the early big clashes between environmentalists and development people. So, there were a lot of meetings and Florida is a very controversial state anyway. So, there was a lot of controversy, environmental assessment work that had to be done down there. So, I'd say those were the major issues. Wildlife-wise, we did have a lot of very innovative things going at that time. We developed one of the first basic inventory data bases for wildlife. It was very broad based because they're talking about statewide, looking at statewide inventories of wildlife but we worked with a lot of different federal agencies and state agencies. And I think at that time while I was there, we had gotten up to 12

states to participate on the same data base which is an amazing accomplishment because every state, they called wildlife something different. They have different names for the wildlife. So, to get 12 states to agree on at least the names, different than they use. This is how they put data into the data base, this is how to use it. It was pretty exciting. And I hear now that they're up to about 30 states using this data base. So, that was another accomplishment that I had while I was there.

Jim: Then off to New Mexico. I think that's where I first met. No, I guess I first met you at Eastern States.

Denise: Yes, Eastern States.

Jim: You went on to New Mexico.

Denise: Yeah, New Mexico was fun at that time. What I liked about New Mexico; it was very exciting. It was new. Not a lot had happened in New Mexico up to that time. But suddenly, you had a lot of Type A leadership coming there. People like Larry Woodard and Monte Jordan and myself and the rest of the management team. And really pumped it up. Automation was just starting to get hot. New Mexico took the lead in automation which was pretty exciting. Became the pilot state. We also had recreation was just coming into its own. We had national conservation areas designated. We had a lot of special events. Really worked hard on developing recreation in New Mexico. So that was a very hot topic as well. Land exchanges were pretty popular, trying to consolidate our land base down there. And also, wilderness was a very big issue when I was there. And we almost, came very close to having a wilderness bill introduced and passed in New Mexico at the time but it fell through at the last minute but there were a lot of negotiations that went along with this. State government and the environmentalists in New Mexico at that time.

Jim: Why did the bill fail?

Denise: At the last minute, the delegation couldn't get. There were Republicans and Democrats on the delegation and at the last minute, they just all wouldn't sign off, though we had negotiated for months to get a certain. So, the Democratic leadership wanted more acres than was in the final draft bill. And that continues on to this day, that controversy.

Jim: Well, let's move on to California.

Denise: Okay. California was really exciting. All the states that I've worked in have been great. I've really enjoyed every place that I've worked. I can't say I enjoyed one more than any other. California is a great place to live. I did enjoy that part of California a lot. Sacramento, Ed Hastey is, of course, one of the legends in the Bureau. And I, you know, obviously had known Ed for a long time and been my mentor for a long time, previous to taking that job, so we got along really well. And I learned a lot from him while I was there. And I'd like to think he learned a little bit from me about the human side, human resources development side of things. And he said that he would introduce me as his kinder, gentler, approach to people management in California. But, I think we accomplished a lot of really good things together while we were there. We did a lot of work with the environmental groups, a lot of the early planning work what's called biodiversity now. We did a lot of that early work. I think California was just tops in that area. Recreation, California was just outstanding in recreation. I think particularly when it comes to using outside funding sources. They had a lot of excellent relationships with state government. They had green sticker fund which had started before I got there but we used it well when I was there in which sale of equipment, sporting equipment, was translated back into dollars for the agency operations in recreation. So that was just a very positive aspect of the program. So, I really enjoyed California. We had minerals issues, geothermal was controversial, a hot issue there at the time. Some oil and gas. But I think our major emphasis was lands issues and recreation issues and wildlife and biodiversity.

Jim: Then you became State Director in Eastern States. Did the other states treat Eastern States Director as an equal or how does this work out?

Denise: They did then when I got there, they did, cause I made sure of that. But the, I think up until that point you had a problem with leadership there at Eastern States. You had a problem with focus mission. What exactly is the mission of Eastern States? You had some neglect from Washington Office, etc. It's one of the reasons Cy wanted me to come there was to boost that part of the operation. The, as I think he recognized, two-thirds of the population is still in the Eastern United States. We don't get wilderness legislation passed without people in New York voting for it. I think Cy had an early recognition of what the significance was of what goes on in the East to the Bureau as whole. Because if you don't think wilderness legislation, as an example, that's not usually passed by local folks. A lot impacts on BLM are driven by New Jersey and New York and Florida folks and the congressional people in those states. So, what I did in Eastern States was two-fold. One internally because of the way they had been treated in the past. They had very low morale, had actually no people when I got there. And Larry Hamilton, I selected as my Associate State Director came with me at the exact same time. And that was a critical selection. I picked Larry Hamilton because he was top-notch in human resources development, just the best the Bureau had. And in training, he was excellent. Had been head of the training center. And just really knew how to work with people. And that's what they needed. He had an office that was totally demoralized, 45 percent vacancy rate when I arrived. Management team not there. Everybody was acting as managers had left. The biggest problem was there had been no State Director there for a year. There had been no Associate there in a year. I'm just surprised people came to work every day. It was really not a great incentive to do that. But, you know, I attribute that to the dedication of the people that worked there, that kept doing their job despite the fact of having no leadership in place and no attention from the Washington Office as to whether leadership or not. So, I really attribute a lot to the people that work there at Eastern States for keeping on when the top was very shaky. So, we came in, I mean it was wide open. You had no managers, so we established a new management team. Picked some really excellent, excellent people from the West and East, all different places to come in because I think diversity is really the strength of the Eastern organization. You have people from everywhere and a lot of different perspectives and people understand the Eastern constituency, something that you need to,

as well as a mix of people understanding the Western part of BLM. So, we mixed it up. As far as the management team, filled vacancies, restructured, got a mission statement together, restructured that and really gave it raise on betrum. On the other hand, I worked really hard with the external people. We developed a lot of partnerships and programs that Eastern States hadn't done that much with in the past. Recreation became one of our top programs here in the East. Things like West Virginia and recently someone showed me a picture, it was this banner and they had this conference meeting in West Virginia, and they had a big banner, Welcome BLM. We don't get too much of that in the West. So, we developed these really excellent partnerships with the states in the Eastern United States. We worked very hard with the Eastern Land Commissioners, helped them get that started, that organization started. And that's going on still 'til this day. And it works, it interrelates with the Western Land Commissioners. They had a joint meeting every year so that's very productive. I see that as a big legacy. It's really mobilized that group of land commissioners. We, I did a lot of work with the Congress at that time. A new Congress now. But letting them know we were there and what the advantages of us were. That we could get them information about Western BLM. Answer questions, give them the insight they needed, and we were really close. Wild Horse and Burro Program really picked up. Again, we're carrying that for the Bureau, the adoption program. The adoption demand is in the East primarily, not so much the West. Without the East functioning efficiently, you have a clog in the West with horses backed up, damage to the ecosystems, expense, trying to do something with the horses in the West. So, we really worked hard on the Wild Horse and Burro Program. Again, it took a lot of partnerships and there's some legacies going to this day in a positive manner like Kentucky Horse Park. We have an outstanding relationship with that organization. And they have an annual Wild Horse and Burro Days which is their biggest draw of the season at Kentucky Horse Park. It's a BLM event. They also have a program with inter-city kids that they use to help train wild horses. So, it's those little things as far as image that really changed, I think, during the tenure of me and Larry at Eastern States. So it did, you know, Eastern States sort of rose image-wise the Bureau and I think image-wise in the community. So, I'd like to think that was a really positive thing. The other key thing we did was lands records which I think you've had some interest in in the past. We really got that project operational. And again, that was a vision of Curt Jones, the previous State Director there. But he

got it started and had problems keeping it going. I think we pushed it over the top, have a lot of excellent relationships with the states and it's moved to a new dimension now, technology-wise. And now we're putting them on CD-ROM disks that are very popular with the states. And also, you have remote access that you can, don't have to write a letter to Eastern States and wait weeks for someone to research it, wait weeks for them to get it in an envelope back to you. Now that there's remote access, you can directly get the land records that you need. So, customer service just has skyrocketed there and improvement in customer service. So Eastern States, it was just a very, it was a neat assignment. I thought it was like a swat team approach of Larry and I going in there. But it was, I think, in dire straits. Moving even simple things like moving to a new building. It was sitting in a condemned building. I mean it was that lack of attention for what was going on that people hadn't gotten the office space. The Washington Office or anybody hadn't taken care of that. So, we moved to just an outstanding, I feel it's the really the nicest State Office in BLM right now in Springfield, Virginia. And, again, something like that improved customer service. It's an office now that people might like to come visit to get information. It's accessible as far as the lands records stuff. Finally, the first time in history, the lands records are safe. They're in a vault that's temperature controlled. Never in the 200 years have they had that kind of protection. And the morale of the office increased tremendously. They weren't sitting with ceilings falling down on them. They had really nice office space and I think they responded accordingly. Yeah, I feel Eastern States came a long way.

Jim: Skipping over your working on NBS and then your coming to the number two person in Bureau of Land Management under Jim Baca. I guess the first question is, why you?

Denise: I think what Jim told me. One, I was the best qualified is what he made it really clear. And he obviously quite a few applicants for that position. He felt I had technical strength, the knowledge of the Bureau. I had 20 years in BLM. I had a 12.0 perspective. I did work for the East and the West. Washington Office, District Office, State Office. You didn't see that many people that had that breadth of experience at every level of the organization. He was looking

for change, somebody that was on for a new vision, create a new vision. Someone that was tough enough to implement the new vision. Wasn't beholding to any one in particular. So, I had some dependence and objectivity. And we got along. So, I think it was, he was just really pleased to be able to pick the best qualified person that happened to be me.

Jim: Okay. I hope this isn't interfering too much. What, well, now that we've got you as Deputy Director here, you know, what had been the big issues in your mind that you've had to deal with?

Denise: I would say change has been and that's sort of a cliché, but change has been the biggest issue we've had to deal with here in the past couple of year. We had a new administration, new Congress, new direction as far as where we needed to go, and you had an internal turnover that was unprecedented as far as people within in the Bureau. I think the, we had changes. You know, every time you have a new administration, you have new people coming in that you have to educate about BLM. Bureau of Land Management is not one of the better-known Bureaus in government. So, there's some downtime in letting people know what our mission is, what we do. We're not here to rape, pillage, and plunder. We're not here because we're totally green. Depends on what administration comes in. BLM always has to explain what its mission is and where it stands which is pretty objective. It's one of the most objective bureaus in government. So, there was that. Having to, you know, spending a lot of time with new people, getting them up to speed on what we do. In addition, which was totally unprecedented, was and I never would have guessed that we would have had 11 of 12 State Directors leave or take another position. I just did not anticipate, we knew there were going to be changes but not that, did not anticipate that level of change. So, I feel one of the most exciting, in fact, I would hope my major accomplishments here was helping BLM through that period. And we came out in the end with just an outstanding management team, tops. I would operate it against any government bureau. Definitely anyone in Interior and probably anyone overall as we picked people who were very knowledgeable either in the Bureau or where they came from. We brought a couple of outside people. We felt it was really positive, that you need some fresh blood, a fresh mix of perspectives. We

picked people who are progressive, who can weather change, who know enough about human resources to be able to guide people through this most difficult period that we're coming up towards and who could vision and communicate with each other. We thought it was really neat to get away from the turfism of BLM that it was State against State and who could top the other person. And really get on to working as a nationwide team to get the job done. So, I think we accomplished that. So that was a big issues, as well. We've obviously had some major controversies, what was called Rangeland Reform or Mining Law Reform or budget cuts or national performance review and all of those types of controversies. And I think we've weathered them very well. BLM is a can-do agency. It always steps up to the plate and what people want done as far as the administration is concerned. And I think we did with a minimal negative impact on our employees as compared to the other employees in Department of the Interior. So, I'm pretty happy about that. The reorganization is a key to the future of BLM. When you have less money to deal with, when you have less positions to deal with, and you have an ever-increasing mission to get done, you have to look at new ways to do it in. So, hoping the reorganization, whether it's the field organization strategy in the West or the Washington Office reorganization will put BLM better, more flexible position and be able to weather storms of decreasing budgets.

Jim: The Bureau is changing and it's changing drastically. I know there's been some concern among people in the field I've talked about in various changes and emphasis in the agency. And one of the things and I know you've heard this comment before, and I've heard through various third sources what your reactions have been. One of the big concerns has been this emphasis on corporate and some of the people in the field say well, we're not a business. You know, why are we emphasizing this so-called corporate image or trying to act like a corporation. What's your response to that?

Denise: I guess my response is they better start acting like a business. Okay? Times have changed. Maybe some people don't realize the factors in government have changed a lot. In the past, the government did not have to be cost-efficient. It wasn't expected to be. Nobody asked it any questions about that. We did seem to have unlimited money, unlimited positions.

We had a lot of flexibility to do what we wanted to, when we wanted to. The public wasn't that interested in the past. They weren't making too many demands. So, what you have now, however, is a demanding public. They want the same quality of service out of the government that they get out of private industry. They want it. They demand it but if they don't get it, then they don't need you. So, that's one issues. You have to efficient. Now you have blocks of money. You have sideboards on your money. If one thing goes up, something else has to go down. We never had to deal with that in the past. So, you're going to have to, as a corporation, look at the bottom line, look at your priorities, look at how you're spending money, where you're spending money and adjust accordingly. You don't have the security anymore. I mean a government job used to be a government job for life and people have to realize that's not the case anymore. USGS just issued 500 RIF notices last week. That's a bureau that's never done anything like that. And people are in a lot of shock over there. So, what that means is you don't have that security anymore. So, we're not very different from private industry. And I think what you have to look at is managing not such much we're going to be GM, cause we're not. Because we have some missions a GM doesn't have. The thing about private industry is they can slough off the stuff a lot more easily than government. The reason you have government is to pick up some things that private industry doesn't feel cost-effective to have. So, we're always going to have some of that. But at the same time, we're going have to look at them. Mike Dombeck stress this over and over. Things we need to stop doing. Private industry, I mean, if there's something that's really not cost-effective and your customers don't want it, you can't afford to do it. And Bureau of Land Management, just as the Forest Service and everyone else, you have a limited amount of money, a limited amount of time. If you want to give the quality of service that means you're going to have to provide different or less services than you have. And that's something I don't think we're really wrestling with in the Bureau. It's really hard for people to give up things that we've always done. Things, tradition of things that we've always done. But I think and Mike has stressed this, it's the idea of the corporate, ideas, Mike's idea I think was an excellent idea. Mike Dombeck's concept is one you have to work as a team to get things done and because of the Board of Directors as Mike used to call it, that's fine. The semantics are not important. And that's what I try to get across to people. The semantics are not important. Whether he

calls it a Corporate Board or Corporate Team or whatever, it's the idea that's important. The idea is that the Washington Office leadership works as a team to make the tough decisions that have to be made. And the Executive Leadership Team as far as involves the State Directors works as a team to make the tough decisions that have to be made. The Field Committee which is the Associate States Directors get it done. A very good implementor, an excellent group. Getting a lot of new players in that. But they're making some really hard, tough choices. And so, we have to start thinking like business does. The circumstances have must us act like business. And we haven't had to do that before. And it's difficult for people to comprehend. But I think unless people make that mental change, they won't survive either cause this is the realities. It's not going to go backwards. It doesn't matter whether Republicans are in, or Democrats are in, you know, this is the tone that's been set by the public. This is what they want. They want quality. They want efficiency. They want less government. They want less interference as far as regulations and they want it all now. And that's a tough order to come up with but I don't think we have a choice.

Jim: Okay. Talking about the some of the various issues that have been on your plate since you've been here. Mining reform, what went wrong?

Denise: Mining reform, I think it just got swallowed up in everything that was going on. I think it was a matter of timing. There was just a new Congress and so much going on that, again, not everything got done. I think mining law was one of those that's getting the sponsorship, and everybody organized to get the hearings and everything. It just didn't happen. Just didn't happen. So, I think it was just a matter of timing, got swallowed up in other priorities. Mainly, grazing.

Jim: Yeah, well that's the next big issue. I guess it could be argued whether range reform is successful or not. What do you think is going to happen there?

Denise: Well, I was sort of amused by all the angst over August

21st because nobody turns into a pumpkin on August 21st. August 21st was just implementation of new regulations which had gone through intense public comment, over 30,000, I think. Something like 38,000 public comments went into the development of those regulations, a lot of meetings, a lot of workshops, a lot of letters, a lot of one-on-ones went into that product. So, I think, at least in my tenure in the Bureau, it is the most publicly exposed effort that we've ever made to involve the public in something. So, I think, I'm optimistic about the concepts that were behind it are very sound, healthy ecosystems. I think, I mean, ranching is not going to survive. But I hope the ecosystems as anybody else. So that has the number one priority that we're working towards. And I think the majority of the ranchers are excellent managers, a majority of the ranchers are excellent stewards, and we'll continue to work with them as we've always worked with them. And do an excellent job on the land. I think it's just a few people that haven't been taken care of the land. And it wouldn't matter what regulations or whatever you have, there's going to be that element of it. I think the positive thing about these regulations is it helps the good stewards work with us more effectively. It helps the public be more involved, you know. There's a set manner in which the public can be involved. I'm very excited about the Resource Advisory Councils. BLM has had those types of things in the past in different, you know, variations in the past. I think that's just an excellent opportunity to get a far section of views to help as I'm going on to be a State Director. Help me as a State Director evaluate what the public priorities are. To be as, you know, as effective as any public meeting you have, here are 15 people that will sort of be there to bounce ideas off and give you advice, to keep the pulse on the community and let you know, well, this is not going well, this is going well. There's a mini-evaluation team to help funnel the input from the public in developing the standards and guidelines that we're going to be doing. So, I think the, you know, what was called Rangeland Reform, I think it's an outstanding effort. BLMers put a lot of work into it, a lot of work and BLM people are excellent in busting their butts for the Bureau and for the country. And I think they did an outstanding effort on that and I'm pretty optimistic that it'll succeed.

Jim: Okay. What happened to ecosystem management? You very seldom hear the word anymore in the field.

Denise: Yeah, ecosystem, again, semantics. People get hung up on semantics. TQM, what happened to TQM? I mean it's just, it was just a term that came and went. The concept stays forever. The quality and direction of products is going to stay forever whether you call it TQM or something else. And it's the same for ecosystem management. Ecosystem management, I think, I certainly read about it when I was a wildlife major in college back in 1970. It's not a new concept at all. What is just means is that you look holistically at what's out there. And instead of trying to manage species by species, which leads to what Babbitt used to call his train wrecks, you look at all of the animals in the area, all the plants, all the people, and come up with some kind of compromises that will help them all survive well. So, again, it was a term just like any other terms that come and go and government is infamous for that.

Jim: But are we working still working on some kind of overall policy plan in trying to implement such a

Denise: Yeah, maintaining healthy ecosystems. Mike Dombeck talks about it all the time in all of his speeches. You know, we have five themes that we're working on. Maintaining healthy ecosystems has to be the number one priority for Bureau in their mission. And BLM people have always, to me, been concerned about that and worked on it. And we will continue to be concerned about it and work on it. Some things, changes we're making in the organization supplement or assist us in getting that job done. Instead of the wildlife biologist just doing his or her little report and the minerals person doing their little separate report and hoping at the end it'll make sense which they don't usually. They conflict. But getting everybody in the same truck and sending them out there at the same time, look at it at the same time, and agree while we're out there in the field on what needs to be done. So, I think, I don't see any changes in that happening. I think just one of the early problems with the ecosystem, again it's the terminology, people get hung up on the terminology. And I don't think it was well explained to the public what that meant. I mean, as a biologist, you learn about it in school, but the general public wasn't too sure. You know, it was another new thing that was being thrust upon them. And I don't think it was explained very well to them. And it led to some backlash against, again,

against the term but I think, and Mike Dombeck says this all the time, when he talks to people about healthy ecosystems, more riparian habitat, better, more fish, people say oh, is that what you're talking about? Oh, well that's okay. So, it's just a matter of how we communicate it.

Jim: Okay. Well, since time is sort of running out, I'm not restricting myself to just the tape, just watching the clock. Let me ask the question. You've been high in management through a number of Directors in the BLM. And I just wanted to sort of get your reactions of what you think about each one. Their strengths, weaknesses, whatever. Greg, I guess, would be the first one when you came to Washington as a wildlife habitat manager.

Denise: Right. And I don't think I've had. Maybe I'm lucky. I don't have anything to say about any of them. I think Greg is very much an intellectual. In fact, I think he's going back to being a professor. I think he had a lot of vision. We really enjoyed working under him. He had a definite vision of what he wanted but he liked good people and allowed them to do what needed to be done. And, as I mentioned, we made great strides with the wildlife program and some of the minerals programs during that time period. So, I thought he was, you know, he was just very good as far as setting a vision and hiring good people to get it done.

Jim: Burford.

Denise: Burford. I think unfortunately, Burford had a lot of health problems when he was here. I think it inhibited or affected his ability to get things done. But he was persistent. He knew what he wanted, and he wanted to change the way, the image of BLM, the way BLM operated. I think he made a great transition in change while I he was in the job as a lot of people do. I think he came in very skeptical of BLM and what they did and who they were. And he left a true believer cause I heard him say it many times about the outstanding people that work for BLM. He was always really impressed with the amount of work they did, how hard they worked and that they were able to get things done without a lot of money. So, I saw a real change

in Burford from the time he arrived until the time he left.

Jim: Okay. Cy Jamison.

Denise: Cy. Cy, again, was very visionary. He was very much a leader more than a management mode. He had high energy. Definitely high energy. I really enjoyed working for Cy. He again tried to pick good people and let them do their job. It's the way he operated. And a lot of things that are happening now, really started under Cy which people maybe don't realize. But the greater emphasis on riparian habitat. He was very interested in that. Some of the more environmentally sound issues that we're working on really started under Cy. And he also started to change the culture. He started the reorganization of the Washington Office. He started that. Looking at the western organization and 2015, of course, some people if you remember was the program that he started which was really a forerunner of NPR, National Performance Review. What are we doing, how can we do it better, so I think Cy was really innovative in starting a lot of things that we're now capitalizing on.

Jim: Okay, Jim Baca.

Denise: Jim Baca again had a lot of vision. He knew where he wanted to go. He wanted change. I think, again, it's a matter of timing and circumstances where it didn't work out for him, unfortunately. But again, he was the most honest person I've ever met, most direct person. Integrity, he was just top notch as far as integrity. He had his commitments and he stuck to them, and I really admire him for doing that. A lot of the things, again, that we're doing now, he started. Things like the Summit, the idea of having all the BLM managers come together in one place at one time was his idea. And we were able, unfortunately, to pull that off after he left but that was just one example of an idea that he had that's come to fruition. And Mike Dombeck, our current Director here. Mike has been great.

Jim: Oh, wait a minute.

Denise: Are we still spinning.

TAPE ENDED

Jim: Okay, Mike Dombeck.

Denise: Okay, Mike Dombeck, our current and hopefully future Director. Mike is great. He is a man of the people, so to speak. He is a fisheries biologist, worked in several agencies including Forest Service. He has that perspective. He's energetic. He has a lot of stamina. I think he's really down to earth. People like him. He's an excellent communicator. He really enjoys his job. He enjoys BLM. He's a lot of fun. I think we needed that. In times of stress, Mike is good. He's always very optimistic, very upbeat and I think that's been helpful. He really likes to get down with the people, so to speak and see what they're doing. Go out in the field, see what's going on. He likes to hear from people. He likes feedback. And I think that's just outstanding. I think, you know, he's the right person at the right time. What we need to get done. And I think he has a really good relation. It's hard to not like Mike, so I think it goes over really well when you send him over to the Hill to talk to Congress people, to talk to outside groups. He's just a very personable leader. And I think that's what BLM needs right now.

Jim: Okay. Well, the closing questions coming up here. What future do you see for BLM?

Denise: I think BLM is just in an outstanding position right now. I know it doesn't seem well, but everything is relative. Compared to the other bureaus who have a lot more single mission. Anytime you have single mission, a single focus, I think you're vulnerable today. BLM is like a mutual fund. It's got a diverse portfolio which is able to allow it to weather all these different storms. When development is hot, we have those kinds of resources. When environment is hot, we do that too. I think we do something for everybody, and I think that's really served us well and will continue to service well. I think it requires shifts, obviously. And that's what the organization

structures we're trying to come up with. Hopefully, it will be more flexible. They aren't the stove pipe set in concrete types of structures that we used to have. When you're talking about teams, teams can grow, shrink, move on, disappear, be organized in a short amount of time. And that I think will allow us to be a lot more flexible in meeting the changing priorities. I think we have what the public wants. The public is demanding. We have it. We have recreation, we have energy and minerals, we have livestock grazing for the more traditional publics. We have what the public wants and what they need in the future. So, I think it puts us in a really good position to be able to survive and even prosper in the future.

Jim: Last question. Kind of a two-parter. You can either do this looking at your career as a whole or perhaps just as your time here as Deputy. What do you think are, first we'll say, what are your, what do you think are the three biggest disappointments or failures that you experienced? And then on the flip side what do you think have been the three biggest successes that you've experienced in your career so far?

Denise: Let's say, in my career.

Jim: Or for the Bureau.

Denise: Or for the Bureau. As far as failures and disappointments, I don't have any yet cause I don't think the story is over yet. I think I'd probably be able to say it better if I was retiring tomorrow. But I think, I don't know, the only disappointment I might have is I don't think BLM has done as much to increase diversity as they could have. We've come a long way, obviously, from where we used to be. But I think there's still some resistance internally in some areas to do that. And so that's a little bit of disappointment. I thought we should have come farther than we have on that score.

Jim: Well, as long as we're on that, that's one thing we sort of haven't really hit on. I mean, in your tenure as Deputy, that's been one of your big pushes and you want to expand on that any?

Denise: Yeah, I think it's longer than my tenure. It's definitely is my tenure since I walked in the door of the Bureau of Land Management being the first woman and the first African American woman. And I've continued to be the first all the way along the line no matter what position I've been in. And I think it is a priority. Again, people don't like the business analogy but it's good business. Whether you think it's morally correct which it is or not, it's just good business. The community is changing in a lot of places a lot more rapidly than we've obviously been changing. You look at the future workforce as far as the pool of people you'll have to draw from and it's just a lot different than it was when I joined the Bureau in 1973. And I think the government has been slow to react to that. Private industry has had to react a little faster because, again, they're customer driven, customer-base driven, market driven. They look at the customer and it's like whoa, okay, I better do something different if I want to sell my product. The government has been slow to come around that. So, I think it's still a worthy effort that I'll keep on pushing regardless whether it's popular or not because I think it's the only way we're going to survive. The only way we're going to survive. And so anyway, it's been a personal push my entire life growing up African American in the United States of America. It's something always in front of you that you have to deal with. And I think what I've tried to do is alert the Bureau to some of the issues and the problems and the concerns and some methods of how you can succeed in diversifying the workforce. And I've been, I think, pretty. I've been pretty happy with what I've been able to do personally. And my staffs are diverse. I sort of marvel when people say they can't find any. I've never had any problem finding top quality people of all genders, races, sexual orientations, whatever. I've never had a problem and I've always had, everybody's always complimented me that I have outstanding staffs all along the line. And so, it can be done. As far as successes, well, several different things. One, even though we haven't gone as far as we need to with diversity, I like to think we've made some big strides in diversity due to a lot of my efforts since I've been in the Bureau of Land Management. A lot of programs have started. We just signed an agreement yesterday with the University of Maryland on Eastern Shore. They're very excited. It's a historically black college. They're working with us. And that was the eighth one, agreement that we worked on since

I've been Deputy here. And these are things for the future. I think people tend to be a little too short-sighted. What could I do today? What can I do tomorrow? We have to look at what we need 10 years from now. And these types of relationships with universities whether you're working with Kentucky Horse Park, kids from Lexington, or you're working on public land appreciation day out in Tucson, which I'll be working on there, getting people to volunteer because resources are short. We're going to have to look more and depend more on volunteers from the community. No matter what aspects we take of it, we have to look towards the future. It has to be aimed at that. And so, I think a lot of these efforts I've done have been aimed at that. I'm really proud of the successes in recreation. During this tenure, I've tried to focus on a Deputy job here. Recreation, put in a lot of time, a lot of work, working with private industry in recreation. And I've seen a, what do they call it? A sea change in attitudes of private industry towards Bureau of Land Management in that short time, 2 years ago. Three or four years ago, private industry didn't want to talk to us. They hate government. A bunch of losers. They're slow. They're over regulated. You know, unresponsive, blah, blah, blah. And now they're knocking on our door. They want to work with us. They love our people. They're loving working with our people in the field. They're very excited. They think we're great. They like coming to us before some of the other bureaus and agencies. It's really made a big difference. And I think just looking at recreation is just one example. That's the type of thing I want to focus on one pilot so to speak. I think that's the type of thing we can do on all our programs. And I think it'll be, make a big difference cause recreation, I think, is the future of the Bureau. And Mike and I have talked about that a lot. I will always have the traditional uses whether it's livestock grazing. We need minerals so we can't do without it, and I wouldn't want to do without minerals and energy development. But, at the same time, recreation hits the most people throughout the United States. It hits people of all economic, social levels. All genders, races, whatever. It is the one universal program that we have and reaches the most people. So, I think that's going to be our future. So, I think I'm really proud of where we've come in the recreation program. And finally, to the legacy. Hope is the most important one to me since I've been here is the change of leadership, being able to weather that storm of all those changes, the State Directors. I think we have the most outstanding State Director team in place and Associate State Director team in place. So, I think we're set for the next

10 years if nothing else has been accomplished because I feel that if you have the right leadership in place, it doesn't matter what administration is in. It doesn't matter what the policies are. It doesn't matter what the regulations are. If you have the right leaders in place, they will do the right thing, make the right decision. And I think we're set on leadership for the next 10 years in the Bureau of Land Management. So, I think that's probably the thing I'm most proud of that I've done since I've been Deputy.

Jim: Well, I want to thank you for your time.

Denise: Well, thanks, Jim. Good luck to you.